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V.—*Some Points in the Study of English Prose Style.*

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I purpose in the present paper to direct attention to certain influences by whose action the character of our English prose style is being more or less affected. It will be apparent at a glance that I do not design an elaborate exposition of any one phase of our modern literary life, but simply a concise discussion of some of its aspects that have been impressed upon me during a varied and changeful career as teacher of English literature.

First of all, let me enter my protest against that *democratization* of our style, in which unworthy tendency American writers may fairly claim the precedence. There is a growing disregard of artistic grace and propriety among our scholarly oracles, and so deeply wrought is the affection, that university Professors of English literature will avow with a frankness which borders upon eagerness, their inability to discern the aesthetic power of a great stylist, and their incapacity to receive the faintest stimulus, or inspiration, from his golden periods. A prosy didacticism, a monotonous moralizing that approaches perilously near to cant, is a characteristic infirmity of some eminent instructors. Far be it from me to disparage the influence of art viewed from the moral stand-point; its power to educate and inform is one of its noblest functions. Yet this educative and informing power is in the ratio of the regard bestowed upon grace of form, harmony and symmetry. In America, literary form is in danger of being eclipsed by the dark wave of incoming democracy with its wonted disdain of all that is esoteric in purpose, or artistic in execution. I am aware that it is not impossible to exaggerate the value of literary form. This is admirably illustrated in one of BAGEHOT'S most suggestive essays, but this remote contingency is more than counteracted by the advance of neologism and barbarism, of syntactical license masquerading in the guise of liberty.

There is a class of writers who are prone to identify clearness with coarseness, and fail to distinguish between the academic vesture of the scholar's diction and the orthodox dialect of our "fierce democracie." Such literary degeneracy must be

encountered in all lands in which democracy has run riot, education is empirical, and the dream of BACON'S 'Novum Organum' is almost passed into fulfillment. A germ of disease may be always detected in language; the maturity of growth is the presage of decline, and there is probably no reason founded either in history or philosophy, why Euphuism or Marinism should be ascribed to foreign influences, though it may have been stimulated and intensified by corresponding, or kindred, affections in other languages. The amount of care bestowed upon the philological side of our speech may have aided in the obscuration of the art instinct. If we accept the current philological diction as a criterion, the conclusion seems indisputable. For the philologist, save MAX MÜLLER who is of German birth and training, has reversed the famous dictum and revealed his thoughts upon every thing *but* the expression. This, however, is but one element in the discussion and by no means accounts for all the phenomena with which we have to deal.

I am inclined to regard it as unfortunate that no critical study has been made of the style developed by the great school of novelists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; I mean critical from the view-point of their impress upon the character of our prose. The movement towards facility and felicity of expression, has been essentially aided by such chiefs of romantic fiction as THACKERAY, BULWER and GEORGE MEREDITH. Within the last six months, there has appeared a novel whose religious teachings I deplore, but whose range of vocabulary and skill in delineation constitute it one of the epoch-making books of our language. Rare terms from the vocabulary of psychology are employed with graceful ease; for example, COLERIDGE'S *aloofness* and others drawn from the same recondite sources, perhaps never before popularized by the novelist. Scarcely less inviting are the dramatists of the Restoration—the forerunners and heralds of the novel of life and character. The plays of OTWAY, CONGREVE, and their contemporaries, are a stimulating study. It was largely through the agency of the drama that the stately form of classical English, the type of MILTON and TAYLOR, was gradually broken down. It might be more scientifically accurate to say that the preservation of the popular standard was, in a measure, due to the influence of the drama in the age of Elizabeth, as well as during the epoch of the Restoration.

Another field, by no means exhausted, is the development of

the letter-writing art in the English language. The Memoirs of the era of JAMES I and CHARLES I, the letters of CROMWELL, some of them strikingly modern in expression, the SIDNEY collections; EVELYN'S voluminous correspondence; the letters of LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU, and of POPE; those of THOMAS GRAY, GEORGE SELWYN and COWPER, are invaluable to the student of our prose style during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Each of these collections is worthy of a special and scientific scrutiny.

Another point to which I wish to direct the attention of my fellow-students, is the neglect, so prevalent in our schemes of instruction, of some of the noblest types of prose exhibited in the literature of this century. A conspicuous illustration is that of SIR JAMES STEPHEN, the contemporary of HALLAM, DE QUINCEY, and MACAULAY. No more chastened English has been produced in any age of our language than SIR JAMES'S essays on 'Ignatius Loyola and His Associates,' 'Port Royal and the Port Royalists,' 'The Life and Times of Richard Baxter.' There is a grace and serenity that seems to rest upon the conscious foundation of majestic strength: if I were asked to characterize his style by an appropriate epithet, I should pronounce it the most gentlemanly I had ever met with. Yet SIR JAMES is not honored with a single selection in SAINTSBURY'S 'English Prose,' nor is his existence referred to in GENUNG'S 'Rhetoric,' one of our latest and most rational treatises on that subject.

If the scope of this paper rendered such a procedure legitimate, I should be glad to dwell upon the richness added to our contemporary English by such works as TENNYSON'S 'Princess' and the 'Idyls of The King,' but they must be reserved for another occasion. The history of English prose is yet to be written. As one of those who are assured of the unity of that history, I submit the fragmentary thoughts expressed in this paper to the candid scrutiny of such as may have the ability and the disposition to carry on the task to a successful consummation.